

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 450

CG 017 724

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TITLE Meaning and Purpose in Life across the Life Span: A Cross-Sectional Multivariate Analysis.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Gerontological Society (30th, Anaheim, CA, March 17-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Development; Adults; *Age Differences; *Aging (Individuals); *Attitude Change; Developmental Stages; *Developmental Tasks; Goal Orientation; Motivation; Psychological Patterns; *Quality of Life
IDENTIFIERS *Life Span Development; *Meaningfulness

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the developmental changes in meaning and purpose across the life course. Thirty males and females at the developmental stages of young adulthood (16-29 years), early middle-age (30-49 years), late middle-age (50-64 years), young-old (65-74 years) and old-old (75+ years) completed the Reker and Peacock (1981) Life Attitude Profile (LAP). Multivariate analyses of variance of the LAP scores revealed significant age differences on four of the seven dependent variables: Goal Seeking (GS), Future Meaning (FM), Death Acceptance (DA), and Life Purpose (LP). Existential Vacuum (EV), Life Control (LC), and Will to Meaning (WM) yielded no significant age differences. Trend analyses of significant subscales showed that GS and FM decreased with increasing age; whereas, DA and LP increased with increasing age. These differences reveal that older individuals are less goal oriented, have a lessened need to find meaning in the future, are more accepting of death, and have greater life purpose. These findings provide support for Erikson's view that during late adulthood, the individual gains a new perspective on life and develops a sense of integrity. The person of integrity has a sense of self-identity, accepts death as the ultimate of life, is willing to affirm his/her lifestyle, and has an appreciation of past, present, and future. These findings also contribute to an understanding of the importance of attitude changes and their influence on the aging process. (Author/BL)

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Meaning and purpose in life across the life span: A cross-sectional multivariate analysis

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Paper presented at the 30th Annual Meeting of the Western Gerontological Society, Anaheim, California, March 17 - 24, 1984.

CG 017724

Abstract

This paper explores the developmental changes in meaning and purpose in life across the life course. Thirty males and females at the developmental stages of young adulthood (16 - 29 years), early middle-age (30 - 49 years), late middle-age (50 - 64 years), young-old (65 - 74 years) and old-old (75 + years) completed the Reker and Peacock (1981) Life Attitude Profile (LAP). The LAP is a multidimensional measure (seven subscales) of the degree of existential meaning and purpose in life and the strength of motivation to find meaning and purpose. Multivariate analyses of variance of the LAP scores revealed significant age differences on four of the seven dependent variables: Goal Seeking (GS), Future Meaning (FM), Death Acceptance (DA), and Life Purpose (LP). Existential Vacuum (EV), Life Control (LC), and Will to Meaning (WM) yielded no significant age differences. Trend analyses of significant subscales showed that GS and FM decreased with increasing age; whereas, DA and LP increased with increasing age. These differences reveal that older individuals are less goal oriented, have a lessened need to find meaning in the future, are more accepting of death, and have greater life purpose. These findings provide support for Erikson's view that during late adulthood, the individual gains a new perspective on life and develops a sense of integrity. The person of integrity has a sense of self-identity, accepts death as the ultimate of life, is willing to affirm his/her lifestyle, and has an appreciation of past, present and future. These findings also contribute to our understanding of the importance of attitude changes and their influence on the aging process. Cautions in the interpretation of cross-sectional research were offered and the need for longitudinal investigation to verify the age-related findings was discussed.

Meaning and purpose in life across the life span: A cross-sectional multivariate analysis

Within the last 10 years, the life span perspective on human development has gained considerable prominence in psychology. Developmentalists have always been interested in the description (What is changing? When is it changing?), explanation (Why is something changing?), and optimization (How can it be changed?) of change, both within-persons (longitudinal) and between-persons (cross-sectional). Traditional views of development, however, have emphasized maturation and growth during infancy, childhood, and adolescence; stability during adulthood; and decline during old age. The life span approach departs from this traditional conception and views change as multidirectional. That is, multiple patterns of change can occur across the life span and these differ in onset, direction, duration, and termination. This view allows for increments as well as decrements in behaviour during the latter portion of the life cycle. Thus, there is potential for growth and the development of new competencies in the later years.

The study of life-span development must proceed along some organizing dimension or what may be called "life course markers" that break the life course into smaller periods. The choice of life course markers is determined largely by one's theoretical orientation. For example, Lowenthal et al. (1975), and Neugarten (1968) talk about life transitions in which major normative life events such as graduation from high school, marriage, birth of

children, empty nest, menopause, and retirement serve as markers. Erikson (1963) talks about a fixed sequence of stages at which certain crises must be resolved. Nesselroade, Schaie and Baltes (1972) refer to the cohort, with reference to year of birth, as a useful marker when individual differences are highly correlated with variables that change with time, e.g., nutrition, health, education, family structure, etc. Finally, chronological age or age ranges, accompanied by appropriate verbal descriptors, have been among the most commonly employed life markers. A survey of the developmental literature reveals that the number of chronological age markers have ranged from as few as 3 to as many as 8, with a median of 6. It is interesting to note that when individuals of all ages are asked to partition the life course into meaningful periods, an average of 6 stages have been identified.

It is important to note that the chronological age markers merely index the passage of time and do not necessarily explain the observed phenomena or empirical relationships found across the life course. It is the major developmental themes or tasks and how one copes with them over the life cycle that provide the basis for understanding observed change. Buhler (1959), for example, has identified 4 developmental phases that emphasize a process of setting goals for one's life. According to Buhler, young adulthood is characterized by expansion involving the planning, developing and testing of life goals. Early middle age is characterized by consolidation, a period of crystallization of goals and self-review of life goals. Late middle age is characterized by evaluation of successes and failures and the

re-assessment of one's lifestyle. Although most individuals remain relatively stable at this time, some change their goals to meet changing individual needs. The final phase is one involving the tendency to establish inner order through the integration of life experiences, philosophical reflection, value reorientation, and life review. Others, including Erikson (1963), Havighurst (1972), Neugarten (1968), Gutmann (1964), Levinson (1978), and Could (1978), to name only a few, have offered their own brand of developmental themes or tasks to be accomplished. Analysis of their contributions support the notion of a common underlying theme at each stage of the life course, not too dissimilar from Buhler's.

Consistent with past practice, we have found it useful to divide the life course into 5 developmental stages; namely, young adulthood (16 - 29 yrs.); early middle age (30 - 49 yrs.); late middle age (50 - 64 yrs.); young-old (65 - 74 yrs.) and old-old (75 and over). Furthermore, Buhler's conceptualization of the major developmental tasks squares well with our own orientation and offers a meaningful theoretical guideline for our work. However, our focus, at this stage of our investigation, is primarily descriptive. That is, we want to address the fundamental questions, What is changing? and When is it changing? as it relates to meaning and purpose in life.

The purpose of our study was to explore the developmental changes in meaning and purpose in life across the life span. Perceived meaning in life is a nebulous and yet significant individual process of adjustment to advancing age. Frankl (1963) provides the most comprehensive theoretical treatise on the

importance of meaning and purpose in life. According to Frankl, man's primary motive is his "will to meaning". Meaning and purpose in life is discovered through the exercise of self-responsibility, commitment to self and significant others, and the acceptance of future potentialities. Lack of meaning and purpose leads to a sense of futility or "existential vacuum". Maddi (1970) conceptualizes meaningfulness as a state of commitment, enthusiasm, and activeness. Commitment is the ability to believe in the importance, usefulness, or value in what one does. Enthusiasm is expressed in one's zest for life. Activeness is evident in the pursuit of purposeful activities.

Meaning in life is a multidimensional construct. Reker and Peacock (1981) have developed a multidimensional measure of meaning and purpose in life based on Frankl's theory of "will to meaning". The Life Attitude Profile (LAP) is a 46-item Likert scale consisting of seven factorial dimensions; namely, Life Purpose (LP), Existential Vacuum (EV), Life Control (LC), Death Acceptance (DA), Will to Meaning (WM), Goal Seeking (GS), and Future Meaning (FM). Conceptual definitions and sample items of these dimensions are given in Table 1. These dimensions provide

Insert Table 1 about here

a measure of the attitudinal component of meaning and purpose in life. Some of our recent work with the elderly, presented at the Canadian Association on Gerontology Annual Meeting, found that our measures of meaning in life relate positively to perceived psychological and physical well-being, happiness, personal

optimism, and negatively to depression. We also found that institutionalized elderly expressed reduced life purpose (zeal for life, contentment, fulfillment) and increased existential vacuum (lack of goals, meaninglessness, anxiety).

Method

Subjects

Summary description of participants

Age	<u>Education (in percentages)</u>						Family Income
	Median Age	8 th. Grade	High School	Part Univ.	Post Univ.	Percent Married	
16-29	22	0	33.3	50.0	16.7	3.6	17,000
30-49	39	0	40.0	40.0	20.0	93.3	20,000+
50-64	57	0	29.6	29.7	40.7	69.0	20,000+
65-74	69	10.0	13.3	26.7	50.0	50.0	14,500
75-93	82	46.7	30.0	10.0	13.3	30.0	9,000

All Chi-squares were significant. However, education and income did not correlate with the dependent measures with one exception, Goal Seeking.

Instrument (describe the LAP)

Procedure: The LAP was administered (along with other scales) to 17 females and 13 males at each of the 5 developmental stages. The data were analyzed using the SPSS MANOVA program.

Results and Discussion

Multivariate analysis of variance (see Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 1) clearly shows that Goal Seeking is the strongest variable to differentiate between our developmental stages. Young adulthood is characterized by a high level of goal seeking, followed by a lengthy period of relative calm spanning the middle and the young-old developmental stages. It is not until the old-old stage that a marked decrease in goal seeking can be observed.

In addition, a significant stepdown F for Life Purpose indicates that it is making a significant independent contribution to the age differentiation. A sense of contentment and fulfillment is low during young adulthood and early middle age, but becomes markedly stronger in later adulthood and remains strong in old age.

Equally important is the determination to make the future meaningful. Young adulthood is characterized by a strong need to remain open to the potentialities that lie ahead. This need seems to wane over the middle years as some of these potentialities have been realized. By the old-old stage, futurity is no longer a meaningful attitude. A dwindling potential future and a long history of realized goals have given the old-old a sense of security that is expressed in high levels of contentment and

tranquility. Such an interpretation is supported by the findings of Kulys and Tobin (1980).

Finally, the acceptance of death as the ultimate of life adds significantly to the age differentiation. Young adulthood and early middle age is characterized by significantly lower death acceptance compared to the increasing acceptance of death by the old-old. This finding is consistent with those reporting an inverse relationship between age and fear of death (Feifel, 1959; Kalish, 1976; Sands and Parke, 1979-80). Several explanations appear plausible. The greater acceptance of death by the old-old may be due to an increase in experiences with death-related events leading to the use of more appropriate coping strategies. Our results are also consistent with Erikson's view that greater acceptance of death is one sign of having resolved the integrity vs. despair crisis successfully. Alternatively, Birren (1964) has made an interesting observation that may help account for the high acceptance of death and the low sense of futurity found in the old-old. He postulates that with the likelihood of death in the near future, "futurity may no longer be a useful or acceptable mechanism to the individual. Instead, the older individual reorganizes his attitudes and squares the content of his life with early values and expectations. Thus by reconciling his past life with his wishes and values, the individual is preparing for the uncertainties of death, which will be more acceptable following a successful reconciliation".

In general, the pattern of change in meaning and purpose in life across the life span is highly consistent with Buhler's

expansion, consolidation, evaluation, and inner order phases and offers supporting evidence for her conceptualization.

Conclusion

The results of our research clearly indicate that younger and older adults report very different levels of meaning and purpose in life. Young adulthood is characterized by higher levels of goal seeking, greater existential vacuum, a stronger determination to make the future meaningful, lowered death acceptance, and decreased contentment and fulfillment compared to the sample as a whole. However, older respondents, particularly the old-old, report lower levels of goal seeking, reduced existential vacuum, a lessened need to make the future meaningful, increased death acceptance, and increased contentment and fulfillment. It is interesting to note that meaning and purpose in life are quite low during early and late middle-age. Middle-aged individuals are no longer characterized by a high degree of meaning and purpose nor by a strong need to find meaning and purpose in life, but they haven't yet reached their final plateau either. This stage seems analogous to Levison's (1978) "Settling Down" period, a period of relative stability.

Our results, of course, are based on cross-sectional data and only yield information on age differences, not age changes per se. Consequently, observed differences may be due to factors other than age. Nevertheless, the findings are encouraging and contribute to our understanding of the importance of attitude changes across the life course. Needed are longitudinal studies

which permit direct examination of changes in life attitudes in the same individuals over time. A further extension of our work might explore the source of meaning for individuals over the life span. In addition, it would be desirable to investigate the power of life attitudes to predict the psychological and physical well-being of individuals at each developmental stage. Finally, additional research will need to examine the patterns of change in meaning and purpose in life across the life span for separate samples of males and females. We are currently in the process of continuing to examine these issues.

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Table 1

Reker and Peacock's Life Attitude Profile (LAP)

Dimension	Conceptual Definition	Sample Item
LIFE PURPOSE	Zest for life, fulfilment, contentment, meaningfulness	Basically, I am living the kind of life I want to live.
EXISTENTIAL VACUUM	Lack of purpose, lack of goals, frustration, free-floating anxiety	I feel the lack of and a need to find a real meaning and purpose in my life.
LIFE CONTROL	Freedom to make life choices, exercise of self-responsibility	My life is in my hands and I am in control of it.
DEATH ACCEPTANCE	Acceptance of the inevitability of death, lack of fear or anxiety about death and dying	Some people are very frightened of death, but I am not.
WILL TO MEANING	Striving to find concrete meaning in personal existence, a search for ideals and values, an appreciation of life beyond the immediate given	A period of personal hardship and suffering can help give a person a better understanding of the real meaning of life
GOAL SEEKING	Desire to achieve new goals, search for new and different experiences, to be on the move	I would enjoy breaking loose from the routine of life.
FUTURE MEANING TO FULFIL	The acceptance of future potentialities, future fulfillment, determination to make the future meaningful	I am determined to make my future meaningful.

Table 2

Median and range correlations between individual LAP items and their subscales for two samples of elderly

Subscales	Number of items	Sample 1 (N = 80) ^a		Sample 2 (N = 58) ^b	
		Median	(Range)	Median	(Range)
Life Purpose	9	.62	(.23 - .70)	.71	(.53 - .88)
Existential Vacuum	7	.58	(.41 - .66)	.69	(.58 - .81)
Life Control	6	.48	(.33 - .69)	.68	(.45 - .79)
Death Acceptance	6	.59	(.46 - .70)	.58	(.34 - .72)
Will to Meaning	7	.57	(.35 - .65)	.52	(.14 - .62)
Goal Seeking	6	.58	(.32 - .73)	.62	(.13 - .73)
Future Meaning to Fulfil	5	.70	(.58 - .72)	.67	(.63 - .81)
^a Community	^a Institution		^b Andrus Volunteers		
28 females/12 males	27 females/13 males		43 females/15 males		
Mean age = 78.6 yrs.	Mean age = 81.1 yrs.		Mean age = 69.8 yrs.		
Range 70 - 93 yrs.	Range 70 - 90 yrs.		Range 60 - 86 yrs.		

Table 3

Life attitude means as a function of developmental stage

Life Attitude	Age (in years)				
	16 - 29	30 - 49	50 - 64	65 - 74	75 +
Life Purpose	44.1	44.5	46.7	46.6	47.0
Existential Vacuum	28.1	24.3	23.1	22.5	22.4
Life Control	32.7	32.0	32.1	32.4	29.1
Death Acceptance	23.8	25.2	27.6	27.2	29.0
Will to Meaning	34.4	34.3	34.3	34.6	34.4
Goal Seeking	32.4	28.2	29.1	27.9	22.4
Future Meaning	27.5	25.8	25.2	24.5	21.0

Table 4

Test of the effects of age^a on individual life attitudes

Independent Variable	Dependent Variables	Univariate		Stepdown		Eta ²
		F	df	F	df	
Age	Goal Seeking	12.48 ^b	4/145	12.48 ^{**}	4/145	0.26
	Future Meaning	7.77 ^b	4/145	5.13 ^{**}	4/144	0.09
	Death Acceptance	3.34 ^b	4/145	5.02 ^{**}	4/143	0.12
	Existential Vacuum	2.98 ^b	4/145	1.78	4/142	0.05
	Life Control	2.20	4/145	0.46	4/141	0.01
	Life Purpose	0.91	4/145	3.95 ^{**}	4/140	0.10
	Will to Meaning	0.02	4/145	0.65	4/139	0.02

^a Multivariate $F(28, 503) = 4.14, p < .001, (\eta)^2 = .53$

^b Significance level would reach $p < .05$ in the univariate context

^{**} $p < .01$







